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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000381

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/01/2018

TAGS: PREL PGO ELAB KHUM SL

SUBJECT: LABOR UNIONS AND STUDENT CLASHES: TENSION ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4(b/d)

¶1. (U) Summary: On July 9, protests by the University of Sierra Leone Junior Workers, Union at Freetown campuses interrupted the final examination period. The primary cause of the strike, which generally occurs once a year, was to protest the failure of the government and universities to provide the workers with the additional wages and allowances promised to them in 2005. These protests, coupled with politically-motivated violence between student groups at Fourah Bay College in late May, indicate that college campuses are continuing the historical trend of playing host to unrest in Sierra Leone. End Summary.

"ANNUAL" STRIKE RESULTS IN VIOLENCE

¶2. (U) The July 9 protests, which included some violence, were primarily caused by the payment in arrears of a 30% increase in basic pay and leave, first promised to the Union in March 2005 by the Ministry of Education and universities. Neither party has been able to meet their obligations under the 2005 agreement, resulting in at least one Union protest every year since. As of July 26 press reporting, the Ministry of Education intervened to pay their portion to the workers, but the universities still claim an inability to pay.

¶3. (C) While the protest has become an annual "event," this year's occurrence deviates from the previous norm due to enhanced strategizing and an escalation in violence. The junior workers' strike was coordinated this year to significantly impact the major campuses in Freetown during the examination period. At the Milton Margai College of Education campus in Goderich, clashes between junior workers and students occurred when the workers vandalized classrooms and attempted to prevent students from taking exams. At the Njala University campus in New England, junior workers blocking the entrance delayed the start of final examinations and hampered normal university operations. At Fourah Bay College, approximately 100 junior workers blocked the administrative building and threw garbage. In all three instances, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) were required to bring the situations under control, resulting in 16 arrests.

CAMPUSES ACCUSTOMED TO CONFLICT

¶3. (U) In a previous round of campus upheaval, student groups contesting campus leadership positions clashed at Fourah Bay College in late May. The violence between student groups, linked to secret campus organizations, began during a candidates' forum. Repeated clashes between rival organizations involving makeshift weapons followed this event, requiring a robust intervention. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone called in the SLP and

imposed a 7 p.m. campus curfew. Many students left campus, leading to rumors that the college had been closed. In reality, most students decided to leave campus to avoid being caught in the fray.

¶4. (C) The role of radical campus politics and government suppression is well-documented in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report on the causes of the 1991-2002 conflict. The most recent clash related to campus politics is isolated from the national political scene, but popular reporting still cautions against the potential political and social spillover of such events. The latest have caught the attention of Human Rights Commissioner Jamesina King, and the Commission seeks support in engaging the college campuses through human rights and nonviolence sensitization programs.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) Though the union protests and campus politics clashes are separate issues, general consensus is that the resultant tension creates an atmosphere with greater potential for violence. Both represent areas of needed action for the government: paying promised wages to employees; and targeting the youth population for violence prevention programs. The former, in particular, is an area of great concern. Though the Koroma administration has been more successful than the past government in terms of regularly paying its civil service, rising prices and general economic insecurity means that any mis-step or budget shortfall will be stridently

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protested, with potentially combustible effects. End Comment.

PERRY